

By AN OFFICER OF THE MARINE CORPS



*Published by the Editorial Board Advent Papers,
Church of the Advent, Boston, Mass.*

5c each. \$3.50 per 100.

Additional copies may be obtained from

THE ADVENT PAPERS
135 MOUNT VERNON STREET
BOSTON 8, MASSACHUSETTS

A MARINE SPEAKS

The author of this article took part in the original landing on Guadalcanal, and served for four months there, until he was wounded and invalided home. He has since recovered.

IT is hard for a soldier or sailor to speak of what is not his business. He will tell you of noise and battle, or of parties and girls; but when he speaks of the quiet inside him, it is with slow effort. He speaks only because he thinks the telling will help another sometime. Perhaps you have noticed the break that comes in a soldier's voice in the middle of a story, how his eyes turn away, or how his breath comes deep for a moment. Once in a great while how his eyes fill and his lower lip quivers! He may leave the room, or break a match hard with his fingers. He has seen the face or heard the voice of the dead in that moment; or gratitude, pity, pride, anger has swept up overwhelmingly, recalled by the tumbling thoughts that chase out his words.

It is hard for a soldier to speak of God, because he knows that his profession is not in itself a

Christian one. The life he leads is seldom hand in hand with God. What sincere religious experiences he has had are different from what he has known, and because of this and the fact that there is so little God in his life, he hesitates to talk of it, probably through shame. That is why men returning from the front are not ranting evangelists. They probably met God there, but were hesitant through fear of insincerity and misinterpretation to say more than "there are no atheists in fox-holes."

In the words that follow, don't think I speak for anyone except myself, or for any reason but to try to show a glimpse in advance to those who are going into war, and to those who will not be going, a slight comprehension of what the young man who knelt next to them last year may now be facing.

He left civilian life as an average churchman, someone who had usually gone to church on Sunday and had prayed most every day, *Training* one who two or three times a year — at Christmas, during Holy Week, or after a retreat — grew close to God and tried to do so more often. Perhaps his future held plans for a holier life. He probably put off the day when he would

turn completely to God, but at times he thought of it. Suddenly into this ambling Christian life came the great change of joining the service. He left his home and with it his habits of church and prayer. In the new life at the barracks, there was no leisure, and all energy had to be given to the job in hand. Night came quickly and he was too tired to pray. Reveille came even more quickly. The days were full. Sunday was his own, but his kind of church was not handy, and any way he wanted to sleep. There was no privacy in the barracks and no quiet. There was no one with whom he cared to talk of the things of the soul. Gradually even the slightly Christian way of life he had built slipped away and became lost in the clamor of training and liberties or passes. Occasionally he would get to church or, with the help of his memory, pray quickly and superficially to the God he used to know who still must be there.

The months rolled by until the dark morning of D-day when, thousands of miles from home, he scrambled down a net to the boat that rose and fell in a tropic sea. Naturally, the conventional thing to do was to say a prayer. He said one, but there was no reality to it — merely words like, "Let me get through this business, God, without making any bad mistakes or being disgraced. Forgive me,

Father, and if I should be killed, have mercy." But there was no contact. He was too excited.

Now he was a man leading other men into battle, but underneath the green dungarees he was still the boy who had prayed once in a while at home. He was soft, like all American boys are soft, and the softness was due to harden, or break. The steps of the gradual hardening were a series of shocks, and with each shock came an opportunity to find a closeness to God.

Late in the afternoon of the first day ashore, he saw a pathetic little Japanese boy curled up by the side of a trail with beardless cheeks and small feet. He'd never seen a dead man before, and certainly not one shot to death. This youngster did not seem like the fierce Japanese soldier he had read about. A violent shame came over him. "We are guilty too," he thought. He asked God for forgiveness.

At noon the second day he climbed a hot, baked hill. A strange sweet scent came down from it. As he drew near the top he saw some of our soldiers on stretchers, lying face down. There were flies on their ears. "O God," he thought.

Later he watched a Jap leap up out of the long grass and run for safety. He was shot down like

a rabbit. Pictures of his little children were passed around.

A few days later on a dark beach he heard that his closest friend had been killed trying to rescue another man. A burning anger was his only reaction to this and a desire to fight.

He was growing hard, but with each shaking experience, he found God strong enough to lean on. The hardening grew and with it a humility. How did this man or his bestial existence of dirt, hunger, fatigue, blood and killing affect his relationship with God?

In every book on prayer there is emphasis on daily life and the importance of habit in prayer. To this end rules of life, varying in intensity, are subscribed to. But one habit relies upon another. Morning prayer relies on the habit of arising in the morning; Sunday Mass on the habit of not working on Sunday; and grace at meals on the habit of eating meals. In combat some, if not all of these are lost. How then did this average Christian keep any rule?

After the fourth or fifth day of combat came Sunday. A flat field was found next to the sea, surrounded by green jungled hills.

Deepening Hundreds of dirty men knelt down.

Mud was on their clothes, perhaps blood on their hands. The musty smell of the tropics and of the dead was in the breeze. Everything was rotten. Many men had seen close friends killed. All had gone through too much already. Some leaned on their rifles. Others had laid their pieces carefully beside them. Most of the mussed heads were bowed, but when they lifted, they saw what they needed to see and felt inside what they needed to feel. The only clean thing on the island was the sparkling purity of the altar cloth and chasuble. They knew that despite their experience, the part of their soul that was God's would be white. That was comfort.

Perhaps the simile is sacrilegious, but that first Mass seemed more like taking a bath than anything else. For those who had not been able to go to confession, this was our first real strong contact with the living God. Living, that was it. God was alive, had been alive, would be alive, alive, alive. It is hard to tell what that word meant. There was a lesson. Man could fall sick, bleed, die, rot. But God was alive. God could not rot. God was clean and alive. The living God. The resurrection. When God did die, when Christ suffered the unholy indignity of death, it was for us, that we might overcome death. Now the boy was learning.

He was growing hard to the sights and the feelings of war, but he was growing deeper. The thoughts and unexpressed prayers of that first Mass would stay long with him and perhaps fill a need for weekly attendance at the Eucharist. And then there is a friend of his at home who prays for him at the altar. This all somehow comes close to the spirit of a rule, and through the knowledge gained thereby brings him to the goal of closeness to God and faith in prayer and intercession.

Daily prayer was intermittent at best. In the lonesome darkness of an evening watch there would be a silent time when he could pray, but no more than words came to him and memory of feeling. His soul became inarticulate. However, those word prayers probably helped more than he thought and later sleep came easily when the soul had been given to God.

Fasting was a military necessity. He used the hardship of too little food as a way of worship when he thought of it.

Things changed, however, as the campaign wore on. The novelty and shock once over, he found
Dependence boredom, exhaustion, pressure, sickness, responsibility, nervousness build with each ensuing day. Sometimes the

burden became too great. It was at such times that God could help. He found himself passing more and more of his weighty task to a more capable and tireless Master. He knew that alone he could not do it.

One day he faced a choice. It was a choice he had thought of many times and one he had worried about facing. A man was wounded in front of the line, in a position covered by enemy automatic weapons. The circumstances were such that no criticism would ever have been considered had he not gone out. It seemed suicide. He could not commit suicide. He quickly thought and quickly prayed, "What difference the body, God will take care of *me*. If my body is destroyed, it makes no difference." So off he went to drag back the wounded man. He did not need to be brave. There was nothing to be brave about.

Little by little the tension, which was the disease of the campaign, grew. Victory seemed impossible. Life a thing of dubious value or overwhelming importance. Discouragement and elation followed quickly one another. All men felt the cold hand of fear reaching up inside them, ready to clutch the heart and squeeze it until they became hysterical wrecks like the others who had shivered the night with sobs. Sanity was a sloping wall they

clung to with breaking fingernails. Could a man like this lead others?

He reached out and said over again and over, "A mighty Fortress is our God." A fortress to hide behind in the glare and blistering of a fierce fight.

And then, when time grew short, when a bullet found its mark, the same God that had stood by during the long weariness seemed willing to have him say, "Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

* * *

The dream, the long tiresome dream was over. The waking was slow; the dream was tenacious. Fever-ridden nights dragged him back to it and worse battles were fought in the dark humidity of a groaning dugout of wounded men. Fantastic catastrophes occurred in delirium between the hot sheets of makeshift hospitals and the recurring theme of the catastrophes was the loss of men. He could not comprehend; he could not convince himself that he now had to worry only for himself. His subconscious mind still was oppressed with the responsibility for other lives.

And there is a paradox. He had thought that life meant less now to him. He had grown callous to its presence or absence. Yet in another sense

he had discovered it, found it flashing brilliantly, found it as an entity that possessed the quiet of a New England farm or the low talking of a friend, or the exhilaration of sensations made acute by hardship. He knew that in it, if he kept faith, he could express something of the deep worth he had found in human nature.

He wrote a letter home toward the end of the stay there. "Don't ever let anyone tell you these boys here didn't do their bit, even if they all go home now and live off the government for the rest of their lives. They are as gallant and as fine as they come. . . . These men have given and given and given. They shouldn't be asked to give any more until there is rest. I've seen a lot since I left you and seen too much and lived too much. I know that a man is a being of the greatest worth and can understand the height of the quotation, 'He was a *man*.' The worth of life, the worth of peace is now so real and so significant. But over it all is the deep courage of these men and a charity between them, between the toughest and the weakest, that at times reaches the dimensions of, well — sainthood. I have pride in our own lads — they have done as much as any on the island, perhaps more, and I'd put them next to any group of men who have fought for their country and not com-

plained. And I love these men — perhaps sometime you will know why.

“. . . . Whenever you look too deep into life, it hurts.”

And in another letter — “Life there, if you can call it life, was so completely removed from anything of the world we know that only God was real; God and the many significant sacrifices men made for each other. Men became humble before shellfire and in their humility found God and His help. . . . To think that at least something was left and that the something was Christ made the difference.”

